

The Culture of Chuxiong Yi Nationality “LaoHu Sheng”: The Original Human Art Study for Inheritance and Promotion

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the artistic origins and cultural significance of the Yi ethnic group’s “LaoHu Sheng.” The research objectives included: (1) analyzing the artistic characteristics and generation logic of the “LaoHu Sheng” from the perspective of Western theories of the origin of art (imitation theory, expression theory, witchcraft theory, etc.); (2) exploring its cultural connotations and social functions in the Chuxiong Yi society; and (3) revealing the value of the “LaoHu Sheng” in the inheritance and identity of contemporary ethnic culture. The study used the “LaoHu Sheng” performances and related groups in the Chuxiong area as samples, adopted a combination of literature review and participatory observation, and conducted a systematic study through content analysis.

The study results showed that: 1. The “LaoHu Sheng” embodied multiple origin motivations in its artistic form, including the imitation of natural forms and the externalization of ethnic emotions and beliefs while retaining ritual and witchcraft characteristics. 2. In terms of cultural function, the “LaoHu Sheng” was not only an important carrier of religious sacrifices and nature worship but also a core form of ethnic festivals and social interactions, which enhanced the cohesion and cultural identity of the ethnic group. 3. In the contemporary context, the “LaoHu Sheng,” as an intangible cultural heritage, held significant value for preservation and inheritance while also providing a unique resource and practical case for the dissemination of national culture and artistic innovation. Overall, this study reveals the multidimensional characteristics of “LaoHu Sheng” as a complex art and culture, providing new empirical support for cross-cultural research on theories of artistic origins.

Keywords: Origin of Art; LaoHu Sheng; Yi Culture; Cultural Transmission and Development

Introduction

How did art originally emerge in the course of human social development? Since ancient times, scholars and thinkers have sought to answer this enduring question. The inquiry into the origin of art—once referred to as the ontogenetic aesthetics—aims to investigate the causes and processes underlying the emergence of artistic expression. As a unique product of human civilization, art has long been a central subject of scholarly discussion. From prehistoric cave paintings to the pluralistic forms of expression in modern society, the evolution of art not only mirrors the advancement of human civilization but also reveals the richness and complexity of the human inner world. Throughout this evolution, a wide array of cultural phenomena and artistic forms have emerged, each carrying distinct historical memories and cultural genes, together composing the vibrant tapestry of human art (Zhurov, 1981).

Among many art forms, the “LaoHu Sheng” has attracted wide attention with its unique charm and profound cultural connotation. As an artistic expression form derived from Yi culture, the “LaoHu Sheng” not only has distinct regional characteristics, but also, to some extent, embodies the commonality and laws of human art. It integrates multiple artistic elements such as dance, storytelling, music, and skills. By simulating the shape and movements of a tiger, it shows the Yi people's awe of nature, worship of their ancestors, and love of life.

This study seeks to explore the origin of “LaoHu Sheng” as an art form by first providing an overview of major theories concerning the origin of art, followed by a detailed analysis of the cultural and symbolic dimensions of “LaoHu Sheng”. In doing so, it examines the theoretical foundations and cultural connotations behind this unique tradition. By situating the discussion within the historical and social context of Yi culture, the study analyzes both the particularity and universality of “LaoHu Sheng”, as well as its contemporary relevance and cultural value.

However, with the acceleration of modernization and the impact of foreign cultures, the traditional art form of “LaoHu Sheng” is facing unprecedented challenges. How to inherit and develop the “LaoHu Sheng” culture in the new era so that it can maintain its original unique charm and meet the aesthetic needs of modern society has become an urgent problem to be solved.

Therefore, this paper aims to offer both theoretical insights and practical guidance for the transmission and development of “LaoHu Sheng” in the contemporary era. It also aspires to provide a meaningful reference point for the preservation and revitalization of other traditional art forms.

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To examine the artistic characteristics of the “LaoHu Sheng”.
2. To analyze the theoretical foundations of the cultural origins of “LaoHu Sheng” and establish connections with Western theories on the origin of art.
3. To explore the significance of “LaoHu Sheng” within the transmission of Yi cultural heritage and assess its prospects for future development.

Literature Review

As a unique product of human civilization, the origin of art has long constituted a major topic of scholarly inquiry. According to Lorblanchet (2007), the study of art's origin was historically referred to as “ontogenetic aesthetics,” which focuses on investigating the causes and developmental processes of artistic expression. Since antiquity, scholars have endeavored to answer the question of how human art came into being. From prehistoric cave paintings to the diverse artistic expressions of contemporary society, the evolution of art not only reflects the progress of human civilization but also unveils the richness and complexity of the human psyche. A multitude of artistic forms and cultural phenomena collectively shape the vibrant panorama of human artistic heritage (Zhurov, 1977).

Among these varied art forms, “LaoHu Sheng” has attracted considerable academic attention due to its distinctive aesthetic appeal and profound cultural significance. As a traditional artistic expression rooted in Yi culture, “LaoHu Sheng” embodies strong regional characteristics while also reflecting broader patterns and principles common to human artistic creation. Including the local language chanted during the performance and the meaning of the prayers (Bradley, 2012). By integrating dance, vocal performance, instrumental music, and physical skill, and through imitating the form and movements of the tiger, “LaoHu Sheng” expresses the Yi people's reverence for nature, veneration of ancestors, and passion for life. The fusion of these diverse

artistic elements renders “LaoHu Sheng” a comprehensive art form encompassing cultural, religious, and social functions.

At the same time, Western theories of art origin are particularly important for analyzing the origins of “LaoHu Sheng” culture. Theories such as mimesis, expressionism, magic, play, and labor have each offered valuable theoretical frameworks for understanding its emergence. The theory of mimesis posits that art originates from human imitation of nature—a premise that clearly aligns with the mimicry found in LaoHu Sheng’s choreographic vocabulary. Expression theory emphasizes the release of human emotions through art, which is evident in the performative expressiveness of “LaoHu Sheng”. Magic theory explores the close relationship between art, religious rituals, and magical practices, thereby illuminating the ceremonial and sacrificial dimensions of “LaoHu Sheng” as a ritual dance. Theories of play and labor broaden the interpretive scope, framing “LaoHu Sheng” as both a form of entertainment and social interaction, as well as an embodiment of communal labor practices (Lorblanchet, 2007).

Nevertheless, traditional art forms such as “LaoHu Sheng” are currently facing severe challenges due to the accelerating processes of modernization and the increasing influx of external cultural influences. Aesthetic expectations in contemporary society often diverge from the modes of expression embedded in traditional culture, creating tensions between preservation and adaptation. How to transmit and develop “LaoHu Sheng” in the current era—retaining its distinctive cultural essence while aligning it with contemporary aesthetic sensibilities—has become an urgent issue. The preservation of “LaoHu Sheng” is not only critical for the continuation and development of Yi cultural heritage but also plays a vital role in safeguarding global cultural diversity.

Conceptual Framework

This study seeks to explore the cultural origins, artistic characteristics, cultural significance, and social functions of “LaoHu Sheng” within Yi society through the lens of theories on the origin of art. The conceptual framework of this research is illustrated in the following table (Figure 1):

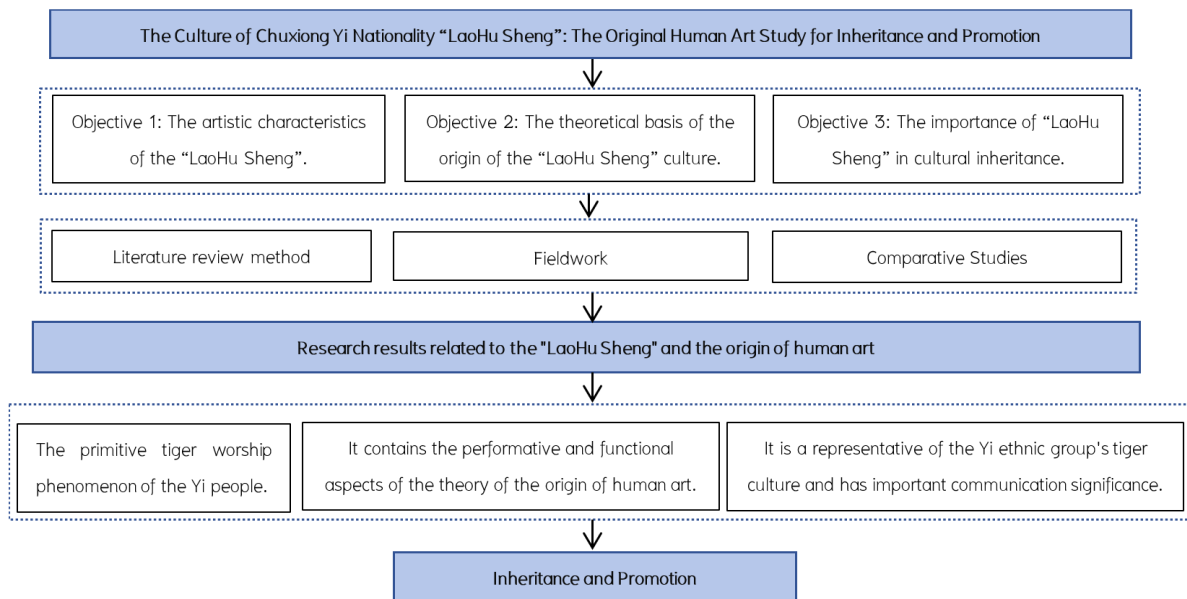


Figure 1 Conceptual framework of “LaoHu Sheng” culture

(Source: Constructed by the researchers)

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, integrating theoretical analysis with fieldwork to facilitate an in-depth exploration of the research topic. The methodology employed includes the following components:

Literature Review: The question of the origin of art is a classical issue in aesthetics and art theory, deeply connected to early cultural phenomena in human social development. Various schools of thought have been proposed within the academic community to explain the causes and processes underlying the emergence of art. This study begins with a comprehensive review of existing theories on the origin of art, along with related cultural studies literature, in order to establish a solid theoretical and historical foundation for subsequent analysis.

Fieldwork: Extensive fieldwork was conducted in Shuangbai County, located in the Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture. Through ethnographic field investigation, a substantial body of cultural data related to “LaoHu Sheng”—a unique cultural phenomenon—was collected. Additionally, I also recorded oral histories from local residents to uncover the deeper cultural meanings and historical evolution embedded in “LaoHu Sheng”, drawing upon firsthand sources.

Comparative Studies: A comparative study was undertaken between tiger worship in the “LaoHu Sheng” tradition of the Chuxiong Yi people and similar practices in Thai culture. This cross-cultural comparison not only highlights the distinctive expressions of tiger worship within each tradition but also sheds light on how different societies, in the context of globalization, continue to uphold and transmit their reverence for nature through culturally specific means.

Research Results

1. To explore the artistic characteristics of the “LaoHu Sheng”.

Located in central Yunnan Province, Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture encompasses Shuangbai County in its southern region, bordered by the Ailao Mountains to the east and the watershed of the Jinsha and Hong Rivers to the south (Lin & Gui, 2025). In the village of Xiaomaidichong, situated in Fapiao Township, Shuangbai County, local residents have preserved a legend in which the decomposition of a tiger's corpse gave rise to all living beings—forming a unique cosmological view known as the Yi “tiger universe.”

According to local oral traditions, ancient Yi tribal leaders were required to wear tiger skins in life and to be cremated wrapped in tiger hides after death, symbolizing that they were born as “sons of the tiger” and would return to tigers after death. Today, the Yi inhabitants of Xiaomaidichong continue to revere the tiger as their ancestor, referring to themselves as Luoluo (the Yi term for tiger) or “Tiger Clan,” meaning descendants of the tiger. With its longstanding tradition of tiger worship and the performance of “LaoHu Sheng”, Xiaomaidichong is widely recognized as the birthplace of this cultural practice. A stone tiger sculpture still stands at the village entrance as a symbol of this enduring reverence (Figure 2).

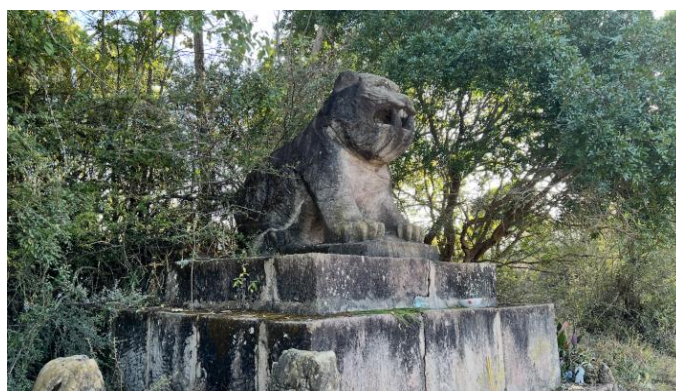


Figure 2 Stone tiger statue at the entrance of Xiaomaidichong Village

(Source: Photographed by researcher, 2025)

Each year, during the first lunar month, the Yi people of Xiaomaidichong celebrate the Tiger Festival, lasting from the eighth to the fifteenth day. The festival includes a sequence of ritual activities: worshipping the tiger, inviting the tiger spirit, painting the tiger, dancing as the tiger, and sending off the tiger. The performance of “LaoHu Sheng” during the festival incorporates twelve stylized tiger dances, such as “the tiger rising on its heels”, “the tiger tiptoeing”, “the tiger opening a door”, and “the tiger swaying its tail”. Additionally, it includes symbolic labor dances reflecting agricultural life: “the tiger carrying manure”, “plowing fields”, “sowing seeds”, “transplanting rice seedlings”, and “harvesting grain”.

“LaoHu Sheng” is both a ritualistic and recreational form of dance. It is characterized by vigorous, powerful movements that express the strength of mountain peoples and their worship of the tiger. Its choreography imitates the tiger’s dynamic actions and reflects the totemic traditions of the Yi, preserving a sense of ancient cultural authenticity. Although rooted in folk practice, “LaoHu Sheng” reflects not only the Yi worldview of tiger reverence and harmony with nature but also the community’s bold, passionate, and industrious spirit. As such, it serves as a symbol of balance between humans and nature, and as a vital element in the transmission of Yi traditional culture. Its significance spans across anthropology, ethnology, and folklore studies, earning it the nickname “a living fossil of Yi tiger culture”.

As a living record of the Yi people’s tiger totem worship, “LaoHu Sheng” carries profound historical and cultural memories. Over time, it has evolved into a platform for preserving and passing on Yi cultural heritage. On June 7, 2008, “LaoHu Sheng” was officially inscribed into the Second Batch of National Intangible Cultural Heritage by the State Council of the People’s Republic of China.

2. Analyzing the Theoretical Foundations of “LaoHu Sheng” Cultural Origins and Its Connection to Western Theories on the Origin of Art.

As a core component of Yi culture in Shuangbai County, Chuxiong Prefecture, the artistic origin and development of “LaoHu Sheng” merit in-depth exploration. In this study, I adopt several influential Western theories concerning the origin of art to examine “LaoHu Sheng” from a multidisciplinary perspective.

I argue that the origins of “LaoHu Sheng” are pluralistic rather than singular. Its artistic structure embodies elements of imitation, entertainment, ritual, and labor, each of which corresponds to key Western theories on art’s origin, including mimesis theory, magic theory, play theory, expression theory, and labor theory. These theoretical frameworks allow for a two–

pronged analysis of “LaoHu Sheng” through performative and functional dimensions, offering deeper insights into its cultural origin and underlying intent.

2.1 Performative Dimension

2.1.1 Mimesis Theory (Imitation Rooted in Nature Worship)

As one of the earliest theories of artistic origin, mimesis theory originated with the ancient Greek philosopher Democritus. It proposes that imitation is an innate human instinct and that art emerges from the human impulse to replicate the natural world. Aristotle, one of the most prominent advocates of this theory, argued that all artistic forms are fundamentally imitative, differing only in the medium, subject matter, and style employed. For Aristotle, the real world is a valid object of imitation, and artistic representation serves to idealize and elevate reality. This idealization—transforming the real into something more beautiful—has had a profound impact on the development of Western aesthetics and artistic practice from ancient Greece through the Renaissance and well into the 19th century (Kuhn, 1973).

Mimesis theory, therefore, posits that art originates in the human imitation of nature and social life—an impulse that reflects early humans’ reverence for and fear of the natural world. This theory has had far-reaching influence across human cultural history, especially when interpreting art forms with strong primordial or ritualistic qualities. In this regard, “LaoHu Sheng” as an ancient dance tradition from the Yi people of Shuangbai County, Chuxiong, serves as a compelling example.

From the mimesis perspective, “LaoHu Sheng” is a sophisticated imitation of one of nature’s most powerful creatures—the tiger. The act of embodying the tiger during ritual dance symbolizes a transfer of strength and authority, allowing humans to internalize the tiger’s awe-inspiring qualities as both spiritual totem and cultural emblem. In performance, dancers wear tiger costumes constructed from bound felt, while ritual specialists (bimo) paint their faces and bodies using red, white, and yellow earth pigments and stove ash. Through vivid and exaggerated gestures, performers express the tiger’s ferocity and agility (Figure 3). This imitation not only reproduces the tiger’s external form but also distills and elevates its inner spirit.



Figure 3 “LaoHu Sheng” performance

(Source: Photographed by researcher, 2025)

Furthermore, mimesis theory reveals the social functions of “LaoHu Sheng”. In early societies, imitation was not only an artistic act but also a social behavior. By imitating the tiger, early humans expressed reverence for nature and reinforced communal identity and cohesion. The beauty found in “LaoHu Sheng” is rooted in its primal mimicry, re-creation of the natural world, and deep emotional expression. Future research may continue to investigate the cultural ties between mimesis theory and “LaoHu Sheng”, shedding further light on the origins of human culture and art.

2.1.2 Expression Theory (Emotional Catharsis and Self-Expression)

Since the late 19th century, the theory that art originates from emotional expression has gained considerable influence in Western aesthetics. It may even be said that modernist artistic movements in the West are largely founded on the principle that art should be an expression of the self (Lorblanchet, 2007). This theory asserts that art emerges from the human need to express and communicate emotions, and that emotional expression is both the primary function and principal motivation for artistic creation. Key proponents include Italian aesthetician Benedetto Croce, British historian R.G. Collingwood, and Russian writer Leo Tolstoy.

Expression theory maintains that art is the externalization of human emotion, thought, and desire. It emphasizes that art reflects individual and collective experiences, serving as a vehicle for expressing the inner world. This theoretical lens closely aligns with the emotional and cultural dimensions of “LaoHu Sheng”. As both a ritual and folkloric performance, “LaoHu Sheng” is an embodiment of the Yi people's emotions, beliefs, and cultural memory.

Through the mimicry of tiger movements and characteristics, performers convey emotions such as bravery, mystery, and power—qualities that express the Yi people's awe of the tiger and their contemplation of nature, life, and the cosmos. In this way, “LaoHu Sheng” becomes a

medium through which the Yi people transform their inner feelings and beliefs into a tangible art form, thereby achieving emotional communication and release.

Thus, “LaoHu Sheng”, as a unique ritual dance, not only showcases the Yi people’s emotional depth, spiritual life, and cultural tradition but also illustrates the essential role of art in the evolution of human civilization. Studying and preserving “LaoHu Sheng” offers valuable insight into the expressive function of art and the emotional creativity emphasized by expression theory, while also deepening our appreciation for the cultural richness and aesthetic values of Yi heritage.

2.1.3 Magic Theory (Animistic Worldview and Ritual Power)

Among all theories of artistic origin proposed in the 20th century, magic theory has had some of the most widespread influence in the West. Rooted in studies of the connection between early art and primitive religious practices, the theory was first introduced by British anthropologist Edward Tylor in his seminal work *Primitive Culture*, where he argued that art originated from ritual magic (Lorblanchet, 2007).

The core of magic theory lies in the belief that early artistic practices developed from magical rituals, which themselves were grounded in an animistic worldview. In this view, early humans believed that mountains, rivers, plants, animals, and even inanimate objects possessed spirits and could engage in mystical communication with human beings. Magic theory is also closely linked to early forms of totemism and primitive religion.

This perspective is clearly evident in the cultural phenomenon of “LaoHu Sheng”. Far more than just a dance, “LaoHu Sheng” is deeply infused with magical and religious symbolism. In Yi cosmology, the tiger is believed to embody sacred power, representing strength, courage, and protection. Each year, at specific times, the Yi people perform “LaoHu Sheng” as part of an elaborate ritual to seek divine blessings and protection from the tiger spirit (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Tigers exorcise evil spirits and pray for good luck

(Source: Photographed by researcher, 2025)

When people believe their actions can compel supernatural forces to behave in specific, expected ways, such belief and associated actions constitute magic. Magic, in essence, reflects humanity's attempt to transcend nature—to understand and control the world through imagined means in service of practical needs (Gershman, 2022). When viewed through this lens, “LaoHu Sheng” clearly exhibits magical characteristics.

During performances, for example, dancers recite sacred incantations believed to summon supernatural power. Local traditions hold that mystical chants can invoke magical energy, bring divine favor, and expel malevolent spirits from the village. These elements are thought to guide and influence unseen spiritual forces.

Thus, “LaoHu Sheng”, as a cultural form deeply imbued with magical thought, possesses both historical and cultural significance. It reflects early humanity's belief in a spiritually animated world and its reverence for nature, while also offering a window into the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of early artistic development. Magic theory provides a compelling framework for understanding both the artistic origins and cultural functions of “LaoHu Sheng”.

2.2 Functional Dimension

2.2.1 Play Theory (Aesthetic Recreation and Divine Entertainment)

Play theory holds that art originates from human play. It sees artistic activity as a form of aesthetic play aimed at creating beauty and expression free from utilitarian constraints. Both art and play share common characteristics: pleasure, freedom, structure, and symbolic meaning. This theory was primarily advanced by German philosopher Friedrich Schiller and British thinker Herbert Spencer in the 18th and 19th centuries. Later scholars referred to their combined views as the “Schiller–Spencer Hypothesis”, which gained considerable support in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Takhvar, 1988).

Play theory affirms that both art and play are expressions of human freedom and creativity, and that they often carry religious or ceremonial functions. In the performance of “LaoHu Sheng”, one can clearly observe this free and joyous spirit. Dancers, unconstrained by rigid formalities, creatively imitate the movements and behaviors of tigers. Performing in the open fields and terraces, they celebrate through dance, experiencing emotional fulfillment and aesthetic pleasure.

This joyful mental and physical state aligns closely with the essence of play. At such moments, performers embody a sacred yet playful communion—what can be called entertainment for the gods. Moreover, play serves various functions in human society, including social bonding,

emotional relief, communication, and interaction. While real life imposes physical and psychological constraints, play offers a liberating space in which people can momentarily transcend hardship and explore the beauty of life.

Through tiger mimicry and ritualized activity, “LaoHu Sheng” communicates the cultural values and traditions of the Yi people. Play theory provides a novel interpretive framework through which to appreciate both the artistic origins and aesthetic value of “LaoHu Sheng”, while the dance itself serves as a living embodiment of this theory’s principles.

2.2.2 Labor Theory (Art Originating in Agricultural Civilization)

Among the many theories on the origin of art, labor theory makes a unique contribution by locating the emergence of art in the practical activities of early humans. Since the late 19th century, European ethnologists and art historians have widely circulated the idea that art originated from labor. In *The Origins of Art*, Grosse devotes an entire chapter to the relationship between artistic creation and productive labor. Russian Marxist theorist Georgi Plekhanov, in his 1900 work *Letters Without an Address*, systematically argued—through analysis of primitive music, dance, and painting supported by ethnographic, anthropological, and folkloric sources—that art arose from the conditions of material production (Lorblanchet, 2007).

This theory emphasizes that labor—especially agricultural and productive labor—was the fundamental driver behind the emergence of artistic activity. In the Yi region of Shuangbai, historical records suggest that the development of “LaoHu Sheng” was closely tied to hunting and farming practices. Over generations, reverence for the tiger and agricultural rituals gradually evolved into the unique artistic form of “LaoHu Sheng”.

The dance itself comprises two thematic parts: one mimics tiger behavior, the other human agricultural labor. Tiger-themed sequences include 12 choreographies such as “opening the door”, “tiptoeing”, “hunting”, “mating”, and “tail swinging” (Figure 5). Agricultural sequences include 10 stylized labor scenes such as “carrying manure”, “plowing fields”, “transplanting rice” and “harvesting”.



Figure 5 “Opening the door”; “Tiptoeing” and “Tail swinging”

(Source: Photographed by researcher, 2025)

In performance, the roles of “human” and “tiger” shift—humans mimic tigers, and tigers mimic humans. This reciprocal transformation reflects a core principle of sympathetic association, in which the symbolic boundaries between human and beast dissolve.

The act of mimicking tiger mating, in essence, becomes a ritualistic reenactment of human fertility, while the rice farming choreography functions as a form of fertility magic—a belief that enacting the harvest through dance would ensure agricultural abundance in the coming year.

3. Examining the Significance of “LaoHu Sheng” in Yi Cultural Transmission and Its Future Prospects.

The transmission and development of “LaoHu Sheng” culture play a vital role in strengthening the ethnic identity and social cohesion of the Yi people. Through observing or participating in “LaoHu Sheng” performances and related heritage activities, members of the Yi community are able to deepen their understanding of historical and cultural traditions. This process enhances their confidence and pride in their ethnic culture. Such a sense of identity is crucial for maintaining ethnic unity and promoting social harmony.

Moreover, the preservation and development of “LaoHu Sheng” culture can also generate positive economic effects for local communities. Integrating “LaoHu Sheng” into cultural tourism has the potential to attract more visitors, boost interest in traditional dance performances, and stimulate the growth of the local tourism industry. The development of derivative cultural products and souvenirs can further satisfy consumer demand and increase local income. This integration of culture and economy presents new opportunities and vitality for regional development.

In summary, the cultural preservation and revitalization of “LaoHu Sheng” are essential not only for safeguarding cultural diversity, enhancing ethnic identity, and transmitting traditional values and wisdom, but also for fostering the synergy between cultural heritage and sustainable economic development. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen efforts in protecting, studying, and promoting “LaoHu Sheng”, ensuring its continued vitality in contemporary society.

Discussions

This study's major contribution lies in its application of Western theories on the origin of art to interpret “LaoHu Sheng”, thereby uncovering the complex cultural connotations and pluralistic origins embedded in this traditional Yi performance. Unlike previous research that focuses predominantly on the religious dimension of “LaoHu Sheng” as a ritual dance, this study highlights its social functionality and cultural value.

By comparing “LaoHu Sheng” with other ethnic dances and cultural practices, this research demonstrates both the uniqueness and universality of “LaoHu Sheng” within the broader context of artistic and cultural expression.

1. Uniqueness

“LaoHu Sheng” is deeply rooted in the Yi communities of Shuangbai County, Chuxiong Prefecture. While it appears as a festive ritual performance on the surface, it also carries profound cultural symbolism and philosophical meaning beneath.

According to the Yi epic *Meige*, a myth recounts that after the tiger's death, its body created the cosmos: its head became the heavens, its tail the earth, its left eye the sun, and its right eye the moon. In *Xiaomaidichong*, many legends explain the origin of tiger worship. One widely circulated story holds that a woman from the Li family—one of the five major surnames in the village—was abducted by a tiger while sowing buckwheat in the mountains. Rather than being devoured, she lived with the tiger and eventually gave birth to a child, believed to be the ancestor of the Li family. For this reason, the tiger is considered the male ancestor of the Li lineage and a guardian deity of the village.

The Yi people favor the colors black (ash), red, and yellow—symbols of life, blood and strength, and earth and hope, respectively (Wang, Mayusoh, Inkuer & Puntien, 2024). They simulate the tiger's appearance through costumes and facial paint, invoking tiger spirits to gain strength and protection. Through melodic chants, they entertain the spirits and convey wishes for divine blessing.

Thus, “LaoHu Sheng” encapsulates Yi ancestral beliefs, tiger totemism, and nature worship, intertwining these elements into a multi-layered cultural expression rich with symbolic meaning.

2. Universality

While “LaoHu Sheng” bears distinct regional and ethnic features, its underlying cultural messages and artistic values are widely applicable across cultures.

Totem worship is a common cultural phenomenon in human history. Whether it is the tiger totem in the “LaoHu Sheng”, or the dragon, phoenix, sheep, elephant and other totems in other ethnic groups and cultures, such symbols are used to represent natural forces, ancestral spirits, and divine power. These expressions reflect not only awe for nature but also humanity’s search for spiritual identity and metaphysical meaning (Lei, 2020).

Tiger worship is not exclusive to China; it is found in many parts of the world, especially in Asia. As a symbol of power and majesty, the tiger is venerated in several cultures. For example, in Bangkok, Thailand, the San Chaopho Suea is a prominent Chinese–Teochew Taoist temple built in honor of a loyal tiger believed to have sacrificed itself in fire for its master. A statue of this tiger now stands as a local symbol of divine protection.

During a cultural field visit to Thailand in 2024, I also observed a small shrine dedicated to a tiger next to the Phra Phutthabat Siri Suvarnabhumi Temple in Ratchaburi Province (Figure 6). This reflects the enduring reverence for tigers within local belief systems.



Figure 6 Tiger statue

(Source: Photographed by researcher, 2024)

Furthermore, tiger-mimicking dances are performed in Thai traditional festivals (Figure 7). These dances blend religious symbolism, folk aesthetics, and storytelling, expressing the power and grace of the tiger through vivid movement and musical rhythm. Such performances serve as both artistic expression and a reflection of reverence for life and nature.



Figure 7 Thai tiger dance

(Source: Photographed by Ariya Wata, 2023)

In conclusion, tiger culture, as a symbolic system, embodies both distinct ethnic identity and shared human values. Its unique yet universal characteristics make it an important medium for cultural exchange and a vital part of humanity's intangible cultural heritage.

Knowledge from Research

Each of the five theories—mimesis, expression, magic, play, and labor—reveals different aspects of “LaoHu Sheng”, and all suggest that art emerges from diverse human needs and practices. These findings affirm that artistic origins are not monolithic, but arise from a rich and evolving matrix of cultural, emotional, and practical impulses.

By studying art across cultural contexts, we deepen our understanding of its essential functions and gain a broader appreciation for human creativity. Future research should continue to explore the plurality of artistic origins and seek integration across theoretical frameworks to advance a more comprehensive understanding of how art evolves as part of human civilization (Table 1).

Table 1 Overview of Theories on the Artistic Origins of “LaoHu Sheng”

Performative Dimension			Functional Dimension	
Mimesis Theory	Expression Theory	Magic Theory	Play Theory	Labor Theory
1. Dress up as a tiger. 2. Use felt to make tiger skin. 3. The big ears and upturned tail highlight the majesty and power of the tiger.	1. It is a manifestation of the inner feelings, beliefs and cultural traditions of the Yi people. 2. It expresses the Yi people's awe and worship of nature, ancestors and gods.	1. Pray for the blessing and protection of the tiger spirit. 2. The performance of the spell enhances the atmosphere of mystery and witchcraft.	1. The performance is full of the spirit of freedom and entertainment. 2. It has functions such as socializing, entertainment, communication, and interaction.	1. The Yi people gradually developed a worship and imitation of tigers through long-term hunting, farming and other labor practices. 2. It contains content that imitates human farming activities.

Conclusion

The origin of art is a multidimensional and complex subject, involving multiple factors such as natural imitation, emotional expression, religious rituals, and social functions. Western theories—including the theory of imitation, the theory of expression, the theory of magic, the theory of play, and the theory of labor—offer different perspectives on the logic of art's emergence, yet no single theory can fully reveal its entirety. Through the study of the Yi people's “LaoHu Sheng” in Chuxiong, it can be observed that its dance movements and musical rhythms embody both imitation and reverence for natural forms, while also serving as a direct externalization of emotions and beliefs. Moreover, it carries ritualistic and magical functions, such as worship, exorcism, and blessings.

At the same time, “LaoHu Sheng” plays a cohesive role in communal festivals and social activities, becoming a vital link in maintaining cultural identity. In the contemporary context, it is not only an important component of intangible cultural heritage but also a resource for cultural confidence and artistic innovation. Therefore, “LaoHu Sheng” not only confirms the multidimensional nature of theories on the origin of art but also provides a unique case for understanding the interrelationship between art, society, religion, and culture, offering significant insights for the protection of intangible heritage and the development of contemporary culture.

Suggestions

1. General Suggestions

The findings of this study indicate that the cultural origin of the Yi “LaoHu Sheng” tradition is pluralistic and complex. Its formation is influenced not only by primitive religious elements such as nature worship, totemic belief, and ancestral rites, but also by cultural factors including mimetic art, ritual performance, and labor-based survival practices. Therefore, in the process of safeguarding and transmitting “LaoHu Sheng” as an item of intangible cultural heritage, we should abandon narrow interpretations that reduce it to either a folk ritual or a performative genre. Instead, it should be understood and transmitted within the broader context of a holistic cultural system.

From a policy perspective, it is recommended that local governments and cultural authorities strengthen the ecological preservation of the “LaoHu Sheng” cultural system. This includes protecting ritual spaces, safeguarding the population of cultural bearers, and maintaining associated linguistic and symbolic systems. Furthermore, on the educational front, “LaoHu Sheng” should be incorporated into intangible cultural heritage education and aesthetic education curricula. Through school–community cooperation and school–museum partnerships, a deeper integration between cultural education and heritage transmission can be achieved.

2. Further Research Suggestions

Future studies on “LaoHu Sheng” should adopt a more interdisciplinary and expanded theoretical framework. Beyond the existing approaches grounded in art studies and anthropology, scholars could draw on fields such as dance studies, folklore, religious studies, sociology, and ecological aesthetics. These disciplines would allow for a richer exploration of the embodied language, ritual functions, totemic symbolism, and eco-ethical dimensions of “LaoHu Sheng”.

In addition, study on regional variations of “LaoHu Sheng” within different Yi communities—and comparative studies with other ritual art forms from different ethnic groups—offers significant academic value. Future scholarship should include extensive fieldwork and case-based data collection, with particular attention to transmission mechanisms, youth engagement, and the construction of cultural identity. By situating “LaoHu Sheng” within the broader frameworks of the “ethnic art spectrum” and “cultural transformation discourse”, scholars can further illuminate the relationship between the origins of traditional Chinese art and its contemporary expressions, providing a more robust theoretical foundation for the protection and innovation of ethnic cultural heritage.

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